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ABSTRACT

This report examines the status of female superintendents in the United States. Women comprise 70 percent of all teachers in the United States, but men continue to dominate educational administration, particularly the superintendency. A 1999 survey revealed that females hold 20 percent of top school-executive positions and that there remain many barriers to female advancement in educational administration. Female superintendents are much more likely than their male counterparts to be single, widowed, divorced, or to have commuter marriages, and they are also more likely to be seen as responsible for domestic chores. Women have a more difficult time relocating than do men; female superintendents who are married must have husbands who are willing to relocate, to take on household chores, and to withstand the public scrutiny of the job. There are fewer opportunities for advancement in small districts, where many women have numerous years of experience, and most women are reluctant to relocate. Women must also endure the sex-role stereotypes still evident in school boards, which are many times made up of white males. The report concludes with 12 bits of wisdom offered by a woman who is a former superintendent and who has 28 years of experience. Contains 14 references. (RJM)

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Female Superintendents, Barriers, and the Struggle for Equity

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Female Superintendents, Barriers, and the Struggle for Equity

Background

The U. S. Department of Labor (1991) contends that women represent 45 percent of the workers in the American work force. In the next ten years, females and minorities will comprise 75 percent of American workers. The large employment projections are encouraging, but females have a long way to go to achieve equity, particularly in male-dominated, executive positions (Holloway, 1998).

Historically, women hold the majority of teaching positions in education and comprise 70 percent of all teachers in the U.S. Administrators come from the teaching ranks, and males hold most of the positions (Feldman, Jorgensen, & Poling, 1988). Men continue to dominate educational administration, particularly the superintendency (Holloway, 1998; Ryder, 1994).

A 1999 survey conducted by Ann Siegel for AASA revealed that women made no progress in numbers for the superintendency between 1985 and 1999. Females hold 20 percent of top school executive positions in the U. S (Chase & Bell, 1994). In Texas, females fill 92 or nine percent of the positions, while male superintendents comprised 900

or 90 percent of the positions during 1996-1997 (Littleton, 1998). Ann Halstead, director of communications and technology for the Texas Association of School Administrators in Austin reported 109 current Texas female superintendents as of April 1999, a ten percent representation.

Barriers to Advancement

Some of the major barriers women encounter in pursuing the position of superintendent involve marriage and family obligations. Other formidable barriers are lack of mobility, time demands, and sex-role stereotyping (Chase & Bell, 1994).

Marriage and Family. Nearly all male superintendents enter the superintendency married, but female superintendents are much more likely to be single, widowed, divorced, or to have commuter marriages. This difference between men and women executives shows that a few women make alternative arrangements in their personal lives for career advancement (Chase & Bell, 1994). Male superintendent wives expect to follow the husband to the new location and to set up housekeeping and family care as usual. The only significant personal change males experience in taking new jobs is a change in location (Ryder, 1994).

Domestic Chores. The male superintendent concentrates his energies on the job and depends on the wife to take care of domestic concerns. In a study of the domestic lives of 1,324 male and female superintendents in 1987, Pavan found that family and society expect female superintendents to retain the role of homemaker and caregiver along with being chief executive officer. Traditionally, the division of labor in which females take care of household work and males take care of outdoor tasks remains unchanged in most male and female superintendent households (Ryder, 1994).

Mobility. Responsibilities at home and at work may be partially solvable through paid help, but a lack of mobility to achieve job advancement may be a tougher barrier to conquer. In an Illinois study of 1,300 female educators who held administration certifications, but not administrative positions, 78 percent of the women interviewed said they would not or could not relocate to achieve a job in administration. Most women do not want to disrupt home and family for a career move (Ryder, 1994).

Traditionally, if the husband receives a transfer to another location to make a larger income or advance his career, the wife and family

usually follow. When the reverse occurs and the wife receives a career opportunity somewhere else, the family does not always see a move for the sake of the wife's employment as practical. The husband is traditionally the "breadwinner," while the wife is traditionally the "caregiver." Consequently, work as a primary motivation for professional women often conflicts or is at odds with society's expectations of wife and mother (Mark, 1986). Some women see changing homes and geographic regions every few years as exciting, but most view such changes as painful and disruptive (Natalie, 1992).

In the few situations where the female superintendent aspirant has spouse support, change often occurs in the husband/wife relationship to accommodate the demands of the job. Phyllis Hensley, former superintendent of Laurel Common School District in Long Island, New York focused her doctoral dissertation on the influence of husband support on the wife-superintendent. The study revealed that seven out of the 21 female superintendents remain single or divorced. The 13 remaining married women viewed husband support essential to their success. Respondents revealed that the move to the superintendency

comes at the price of family time, privacy, and role change within marriage (Ramsey, 1998).

For a married woman to pursue a superintendency, the husband must have mobile employment or be retired. He must be willing take over most of the household chores, spend much time alone, live in a fishbowl, and assume a new identity, that of the superintendent's husband (Ramsey, 1998). Other adjustments the husband may have to make include attendance at numerous district and school events as the superintendent's escort and being the topic of public opinion and attention from time to time. Husbands share their wives with positive and negative publics and relinquish opinion when negative publics voice disparaging opinions (Ramsey, 1997).

Time Demands. Female superintendents work ten-hour days and seventy-hour weeks. The daily work agenda revolves around day and night meetings, events, and board meetings that necessitate attendance (Little, 1995; Ramsey, 1997).

Female superintendents spend more personal time on domestic chores than men, though they work longer hours. Housecleaning, meal preparation, laundry, and parent care generally fall on the shoulders of

the female superintendent. Male superintendents depend on the wife to take care of home, children, and aged parents, but spend a portion of their personal time on outdoor chores (Pavan, 1987).

Marriage and family responsibilities, lack of mobility, and time demands of the superintendency are three reasons women enter the superintendency later in life as compared to men. Schuster & Foote in a 1990 study of school superintendents found that three-fourths of the women versus two-thirds of the men had more than five years of teaching experience before entering administration. Also, 36 percent of the women superintendents entered the superintendency after age 46 compared to 14 percent of the men.

Vertical job advancement within a small district is difficult for women, because openings are scarce. The majority of female aspirants in small districts have many years in the district and are reluctant to move (Ramsey, 1997). Only five percent of the women were willing to relocate to further their career, giving marriage and children as the primary reasons (Ryder, 1994).

Women who work in larger districts have a better chance at advancement without moving. Natale (1992) found that one-third of new

superintendents in large districts advance from within the district. However, 64 percent relocate to assume the superintendency (Natale, 1992).

Because women have traditionally been homemakers and caregivers for the family, they are more likely to postpone pursuing career advancement until children leave home (Ramsey, 1997; Schuster & Foote, 1990). Accepting a superintendency after age 46 may be difficult, but getting an opportunity to be superintendent is even more difficult.

Sex-role Stereotyping. Most search consultants are former superintendents. Since the majority of superintendents are white and male, search consultants are generally white and male and often hold traditional gender values (Ryder, 1994).

The majority of school board members are also white and male. School boards are still very reluctant to hire women to administrative positions, particularly for the superintendent (Ryder, 1994).

Search consultants and board members have powerful influence in the evaluation and appointment process, but they generally hold traditional ideas of male dominance in the top position. Female candidates must be extremely adept at moving the focus of search

consultants and school board members from thinking about the "woman candidate" to thinking about the "knowledgeable, professional educator" who just happens to be a woman (Chase & Bell, 1994).

The ethical question in the representation of women in the superintendency involves the rights of females to benefit from professional and financial achievement in the education profession, to serve as role models for future generations, and to make a difference in the lives of children from the top position. The superintendency remains a male-dominated domain (Mark, 1986). Persistence and determination are necessary if current conditions change.

Conclusion

There is still much progress to be make in securing adequate female representation in the superintendency. Women continue to fill less than 20 percent of the top education jobs in the country and little progress is being made to improve the low statistics. Women continue to experience conflicts between their domestic lives and professional lives, while men experience few conflicts between home and work (Ryder, 1994).

Women need a broadened support system, if the numbers of female superintendents are to increase. In addition, society must recognize the need for gender equity in top administrative positions in education if future females aspire to the superintendency (Ryder, 1994).

Epilogue

I am proud to say that I have been a superintendent. The four years I spent in the job were as time consuming as the literature revealed and at forty-eight years old, those late board meetings were difficult, particularly when the next day started at 7:30 a. m.

I was fortunate to have that rare breed of husband who was willing to support me through my career advancement. We lived a commuter marriage for four years, which was very difficult. I probably would not have lasted four years in the position, if my husband had not been so supportive and if my daughter was still at home, rather than attending college.

I left the superintendency to pursue a career in higher education. I now have an opportunity to share twenty-eight years of education wisdom with female aspirants. Some of those bits of wisdom follow:

1. Seek out search consultants. Make an appointment and go talk

face to face. Be prepared to talk about all aspects of your present district and the one in which you have an interest.

2. If the search consultant route does not produce interviews, look for listings of superintendent openings and send your resume to all that interest you. You will eventually get an interview and a job.
3. Be willing to move to a new location. Moving to a new location puts one in a position of starting over in many ways. Simple things like finding a good dry cleaner, grocery store, and clothing stores is an adventure.
4. Dress and act the part of superintendent, even before you get a top job. Make sure your apparel communicates professionalism and a business persona.
5. Once you secure a job, you must earn the trust and support of a community that often knows little about you or your expectations for the district. A new superintendent is like being a "rookie" teacher.
6. Be prepared to experience new and different attitudes from teachers, parents, and home-town administrators. Your new

clients do not want to hear how great things work in your previous district. You have to make change a "local" idea.

7. Get use to being alone much of the time. You cannot be close friends with teachers, administrators, or parents without breaching your ethical neutrality.
8. Find someone within the superintendency network to befriend. Problems are easier to face when you have someone with whom you can share thoughts and ideas.
9. Have fun while you are in the top job. Meet new people, make new friends, laugh every day, and always talk positive talk to your inner self.
10. Take time to reflect and give yourself credit for the good things you accomplish. Don't ever give up seeing the positive side of your work.
11. Befriend other female superintendents. Help mentor the new ones and always be a good listener and a supportive colleague to new and veteran superintendents.

12. Lastly, remember the children depend on you. Your main objective in attaining the superintendency should be an altruistic desire to improve education for children.

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